

2025 Competition Rules & Regulations

SINGLE TABLE:

There are fourteen (14) Teams competing in the 2025 League season:

Angel City FC
Bay FC
Chicago Stars FC
Gotham FC
Houston Dash
Kansas City Current
North Carolina Courage
Orlando Pride
Portland Thorns FC
Racing Louisville FC
San Diego Wave FC
Seattle Reign FC
Utah Royals FC
Washington Spirit

REGULAR SEASON:

Each Team plays a twenty-six (26) Game Regular Season schedule, consisting of thirteen (13) home and thirteen (13) away Games.

POINT SYSTEM:

Teams will receive three points for a win, one point for a tie and zero points for a loss.

CONCACAF W CHAMPIONS CUP:

At the conclusion of the Regular Season, three (3) Teams will qualify for the upcoming edition of the CONCACAF W Champions Cup.

The three qualifying spots will be allocated as follows:

1. Post Season Champion
2. Regular Season First (1st) Place “Shield Winner”
3. Regular Season Second (2nd) Place

In the event that either of the Regular Season qualifiers are also the Post Season Champion, the final allocated spot will be the Regular Season third place Team.

OFFICIALS:

All officials for all NWSL games will be trained, assigned and evaluated by PRO (Professional Referee Organization).

GAME CLOCK:

Time will be kept per the International Football Association Board Laws of the Game. The official game time for all Games will be managed on the field by the Referee. Allowance is made

in either period (first half, second half, and if applicable, first extra time period and second extra time period during Playoff Games) for all lost time through substitutions, assessment and/or removal of injured Players, wasting time, disciplinary sanctions, VAR reviews, medical stoppages permitted by competition rules (e.g., 'hydration' breaks) [which should not exceed one minute], or any other cause, including any significant delay to a restart. Allowance for time lost is at the discretion of the Referee. The fourth official indicates the minimum additional time decided by the Referee at the end of the final minute of each half. The additional time may be increased by the Referee but not reduced.

Each stadium must have a permanent, electronic scoreboard that displays Home Team and Visiting Team scores, period, and a game clock. The stadium clock will display the time in accordance with the guidelines set forth in the 2025 NWSL Operations Manual.

For statistical purposes, the minutes for goals, substitutions, yellow cards, etc., will be listed from the first minute until the 90th minute. A goal scored at 15 minutes 10 seconds will be listed as having been scored in the 16th minute. Events occurring during stoppage time are indicated with a "+" sign and the extra minutes in a superscript. For example, a goal scored in the third minute of first half stoppage time is identified as happening at "45⁺" (not 48+).

GAME DAY ROSTERS AND SUBSTITUTIONS:

Eighteen (18) to twenty (20) Eligible Players from the Team's official Roster must be selected for the Team's Game Roster. The NWSL will consider exceptions to this requirement in cases where a player is injured or otherwise becomes unavailable within forty-eight (48) hours of a scheduled match.

Teams are allowed a maximum of five Normal Substitutions per game to be used over the course of three opportunities, excluding half-time and match delays, but including hydration breaks.

The NWSL is implementing the new IFAB "additional permanent concussion substitutions protocol" in the 2025 season. This initiative allows teams to make one concussion substitution during a match to replace a player with a concussion or suspected concussion, regardless of the number of normal substitutions already used. If a team elects to use a concussion substitution, its opponent will receive an additional substitution and opportunity.

CAUTIONS AND SUSPENSIONS:

A Player will be suspended for one Regular Season Game upon receiving their fifth yellow card in a Regular Season Game, regardless of the nature of the infraction which resulted in them being awarded the yellow card. A second suspension of one Regular Season Game would result after the awarding of an additional three cards. See below for full YC accumulation suspension totals:

- Player accrues five (5) yellow cards: suspension from their next Regular Season Game.
- Player accrues additional three (3) yellow cards after having been fined and suspended for five (5) cards: suspension from their next Regular Season Game.
- Player accrues additional three (3) yellow cards after having been fined and suspended for a second Game: suspension from their next Regular Season Game.

- Player accrues additional two (2) yellow cards after having been fined and suspended for a third Game: suspension from their next Regular Season Game.
- For each two (2) yellow cards thereafter suspended from their next Regular Season Game.

Suspensions and fines will be levied against Team Staff for yellow card accumulations during the Regular Season as follows:

- Team Staff accrues three (3) yellow cards: Fine and suspension from their next Regular Season Game.
- For each two (2) yellow cards thereafter, Club Staff will be fined and suspended from their next Regular Season Game.

Notes on YC Accumulation and Suspensions:

Players who are sent-off, having been issued a second caution, are deemed to have been issued a red card. Neither yellow card will count towards the Player's yellow card accumulation.

Red card and yellow card accumulation suspensions collected in Regular Season Games will be served in a Player's or Team Staff's next Regular Season Game. Any Suspensions for yellow card accumulation earned in a Player's or Team Staff's last Regular Season Game or Challenge Cup Game will not carry over into Playoff Games; however, the applicable fine will be collected in the current season.

Any Player or Team Staff member who is awarded a red card in their last Game (Regular Season Game or Playoff Game) will serve the one (1) Game Suspension during their next Game (whether it's during a Playoff Game, NWSL Championship, or in the next Regular Season Game of the following season).

GOOD BEHAVIOR INCENTIVES:

Starting in 2025, both Players and Technical Staff members have the opportunity to decrease their yellow card accumulation total through "Good Behavior Incentives." Players and Technical Staff members will each have a separate process in order to have a yellow card deducted from their season total.

Players:

- Players will have 1 YC deducted from their accumulation total every 5 games they appear consecutively without getting a YC/RC or Supplemental Discipline
- Can have YC total deducted up to 3x per season
- Players must have been subbed in by the 80th minute (enter prior to 80:00 and play 10:00+ minutes or start and play 10:00+ mins) for game to count towards consecutive
- YC total cannot drop below 0 (consecutive games count begins once player has picked up their first yellow card)

Technical Staff:

- Coaches will have 1 YC deducted from their accumulation total every 10 games they appear consecutively without getting a YC/RC or Supplemental Discipline

- Can have YC total deducted up to 2x per season
- YC total cannot drop below 0
- Count will not start until first YC is received (consecutive games count begins once coach has picked up their first yellow card)

RED CARD APPEALS

Teams that submit a bond prior to the start of the regular season are eligible to make up to two unsuccessful Red Cards appeals during the course of the 2025 League Season. Players must provide written consent for any Team's Red Card appeal to advance to the Independent Review Panel (IRP).

There are three potential outcomes for any Red Card that is appealed by a Team to the IRP:

- 1) Successful Appeal □ Discipline Rescinded
- 2) Unsuccessful Appeal, Not Frivolous □ Discipline Unchanged, Loss of 1 Appeal
- 3) Unsuccessful Appeal, Deemed Frivolous □ Discipline Doubles, Loss of All Appeals for this season + next season

ONLY THE CAPTAIN

The NWSL has opted into a trial of the "Only the Captain" protocol that was implemented by the IFAB for the 2024-25 season. The objective of the protocol is to promote cooperation between the captains and the referee, increase respect between teams and officials and prevent mobbing or crowding around officials.

This protocol is a tool for referees to utilize in specific situations within games. The referee will initiate the "Only the Captain" protocol by making an "X" with their arms above their head and then stepping back 4 meters from the surrounding players. At this point, only the captain from each team may approach the referee to get an explanation of a major decision within the game.

In the event a team captain is a goalkeeper, a vice captain may be nominated during pregame to fill this role. Otherwise, non-captains that enter this 4-meter area will receive a yellow card for dissent by action. If more than one player from a team enters the captain-only zone, at least one player must be issued a yellow card.

[More information on The IFAB's Only the Captain Protocol is available here at TheIFAB.com](https://www.theifab.com/only-the-captain-protocol)

GAME DELAYS, POSTPONEMENT, AND CANCELLATION

PROTOCOL TO DELAY, POSTPONE OR CANCEL A GAME

NWSL recognizes that emergencies may arise which make the start or progression of a Game inadvisable or dangerous for participants and spectators. Certain event categories automatically trigger the League Office into an evaluation of whether delay or postponement is necessary, including, but not limited to: 1) the failure of one or both Teams to arrive, (2) a lack of preparedness of one or both Teams to begin or continue playing a Game, (3) serious incident, injury or fatality to a Player, Coach, Official, Team representative or spectator or other medical

concern, or (4) unfavorable weather and/or other adverse conditions beyond the control of the participating Teams which would make playing the Game impractical or dangerous for the Players, other participants, or spectators.

POSTPONEMENTS

“Postponement” means not starting a game, or stopping a game's ongoing progression, in order to reschedule the game to be completed on a subsequent date after its originally scheduled date. No Game shall be postponed without the permission of the commissioner or a League-designated representative, unless such postponement is mandated by law enforcement.

TEAM WARM-UP PERIOD FOLLOWING GAME DELAY

Following a Game delay Teams and Players will be permitted a warm-up period. The duration of the warm-up period will be determined by the length of the Game delay:

- A five (5) minute warm-up will be permitted following a game delay of up to ten (10) minutes.
- A ten (10) minute warm-up will be permitted following a game delay between eleven (11) and thirty (30) minutes.
- A fifteen (15) minute warm-up will be permitted following a game delay between thirty-one (31) and sixty (60) minutes.
- A twenty (20) minute warm-up will be permitted following a game delay of greater than sixty (60) minutes

These guidelines set forth a maximum duration for warm-ups. The Referee, with the mutual approval of the Head Coach from each competing Team, may designate a warm-up period shorter than the above guidelines.

GUIDELINES FOR RESUMING A GAME

When resuming a Game that has been delayed or postponed, play will continue at the exact time at which it was stopped and the Referee will utilize the appropriate restart. If the Game is stopped at a dead-ball situation, it will resume by allowing the appropriate Team to take the restart they were awarded before play was suspended (e.g., throw-in, goal kick, etc.). If the Game is stopped during the run of play, it will resume with a dropped ball at the location on the field where the ball was positioned when the game was suspended.

LIGHTNING AND SEVERE WEATHER:

Given the likelihood of lightning during the League season, and the potential for personal injury and structural damage, each Home Team must have a detailed weather delay plan. These plans must be developed in coordination with the venue. The established plans must include the following:

1. Specific persons in charge of decision-making (one management level person from the stadium, one person from the Home Team, one person from law enforcement).
2. Direct contact with the U.S. Weather Bureau and/or Doppler radar.
3. A minimum distance threshold for a storm in order to delay and re-start the Game.
4. A severe weather tracking system to utilize.

5. Formation of a weather delay committee with pre-designated meeting location (and back- up location) that includes the Referee, Team representatives and the stadium staff to meet to discuss the weather delay.
6. Immediate and consistent contact with the League's Game Notice designee
7. Prepared statements that can be used as updates to spectators and media via PA announcement (and video if available)
8. Designation of shelter locations or evacuation plans for those in the venue in the event of severe weather.
9. Teams whose areas run the risk of receiving snow during the season must develop a snow removal plan, including sufficient staff to manage snow removal in a timely manner.
10. Submission of the venue curfew.
11. "Standing Orders" (procedures) published and posted to accomplish the above.

When lightning has caused a delay, there must be a thirty minute (30:00) waiting period from the last lightning strike within the League or venue prescribed threshold (whichever is of greater distance), until activities may be resumed.

INCOMPLETE GAME

In the event a game cannot be completed, the game counts if seventy-five minutes (75:00) (excluding stoppage time) were played. If any Game is suspended prior to the completion of seventy-five minutes (75:00) (excluding stoppage time), due to inclement weather or extenuating circumstances, it will resume at a date/time agreed to by the competing Teams in consultation with the NWSL and will start in the same minute in which the game was postponed.

Every effort must be made to resume the game within the next twenty-four (24) hours following cessation of play. If the game is resumed after the 24-hour period has passed, both Teams may have a maximum of three (3) changes to their official Game Roster. Any changes to the lineup on the field, after any of the three (3) changes to the official Game Roster are made, count towards the substitution allotment.

The NWSL reserves the right to declare a full replay at its discretion in order to protect the integrity of the competition.

HYDRATION BREAKS:

The match referee reserves the right to implement hydration breaks during games to hydrate during extremely hot or humid weather conditions. Teams are required to have a wet bulb globe thermometer, which must be used to determine whether hydration breaks are to be implemented. The following process shall be used to determine whether hydration breaks should be implemented by the match referee:

Pre-Game and Halftime Decision Making Process

The wet bulb globe temperature reading will be required for every League match.

The League shall mandate the use of hydration breaks if the wet bulb globe temperature measures 82 degrees Fahrenheit or higher.

The Referee can, at any time, implement a discretionary hydration break in cases in which player safety is determined to be at risk.

The Fourth Official, with the assistance of the Home and Visiting Team Athletic Trainer, will be responsible for reading the WBGT at the kickoff spot at the conclusion of the pre-match warmup and after the whistle blows for the end of the first half.

The option to employ a hydration break should be confirmed by the Referee to a member of each Club's Team's Athletic Trainer after each WBGT reading.

Any onsite questions should be directed to the game day officials.

Implementation and control of the breaks will be managed solely by the Referee.

Implementation

Two (2) separate WBGT readings will take place during the match:

- i. The first reading will take place immediately after the conclusion of pre-match warmups have concluded.
 - a. If the WBGT measurement meets or exceeds 82 degrees Fahrenheit, there will be a mandatory hydration break near the 30th and 75th minutes respectively.
 - b. If the WBGT measurement does not meet 82 degrees Fahrenheit, there will not be a mandatory hydration break at the 30th minute.
- ii. The second reading will take place immediately after the Referee signals the end of the first half.
 - a. If the WBGT measurement meets or exceeds 82 degrees Fahrenheit, there will be a mandatory hydration break near the 75th minute.
 - i. The cooling break will last between ninety (90) seconds and one-hundred eighty (180) seconds in length based on the Referee's discretion.
 - b. If the WBGT drops by at least ten (10) degrees (72 degrees Fahrenheit or below) prior to the 30th or 75th minute, the Referee will have the ability to nullify the mandatory hydration break.
- iii. Additionally, the Referee will still be able to impose a "discretionary" hydration break(s) if they believe there is a risk to player safety even if the WBGT reading does not reach 82 degrees Fahrenheit.

The ball must be out of play for the hydration break to commence. The Referee will signal for the start of the break and inform both Clubs and all match Officials. The clock will continue to run and all time allotted for the break will be added to stoppage time.

Both Teams will go to their respective Team bench areas.

- i. Player must remain on the field of play.
- ii. Coaches cannot leave their respective technical areas.

- iii. Bench personnel cannot enter the field of play (excluding medical personnel). Entering the field of play during a hydration break is subject to sanctions.

EXTREME HEAT POLICY:

Extreme Heat – Reporting

If, in conjunction with the air temperature being at or above 90 degrees Fahrenheit, the National Weather Service issued an Extreme Heat Warning or Watch or a Heat Advisory, all WBGT readings, even if they are below the threshold, must be reported into the League office by the home Team's operations staff. The League will notify key contacts of WBGT readings.

Extreme Heat – Match Delay Procedures

The Referee will add a third WBGT measurement if the anticipated high air temperature of the day is 90 degrees Fahrenheit or above. The first WBGT measurement will occur approximately 60 minutes prior to the start of the match at the kickoff spot.

- i. If the WBGT temperature reads $\geq 92.3^{\circ}\text{F}/33.5^{\circ}\text{C}$, the home club's operations staff is required to alert the League.
 - a) The League will disseminate the information to all appropriate parties.
 - b) The Fourth Official will take a second WBGT measurement 45 minutes prior to the scheduled start of the match (approximately right before player warm-ups).
 - If the WBGT temperature reads $< 92.3^{\circ}\text{F}/33.5^{\circ}\text{C}$, warm-ups may begin.
 - If the WBGT temperature reads $\geq 92.3^{\circ}\text{F}/33.5^{\circ}\text{C}$, the home club operations staff will alert the League and the match will officially go into a delay.

During the Delay

- A. Similar to a severe weather delay, the match will not start or resume until it is safe to do so as outlined by the procedures below.
- B. The Fourth Official will take another WBGT measurement 30 minutes prior to the scheduled start of the match.
 - If the WBGT measurement reads $< 92.3^{\circ}\text{F}/33.5^{\circ}\text{C}$, warm-ups may begin.
 - If the WBGT reading continues to be $\geq 92.3^{\circ}\text{F}/33.5^{\circ}\text{C}$, the match will continue to be delayed.
- C. A WBGT measurement will then be taken every 15 minutes at the kickoff spot, until it is deemed safe to play, $< 92.3^{\circ}\text{F}/33.5^{\circ}\text{C}$, or until such time has passed that the League decides to postpone the match.
 - The Fourth Official will take the second WBGT reading immediately after the conclusion of pre-match warmups. The same procedures above should be followed.
 - If play is allowed, the Fourth Official will take the third WBGT reading immediately following the Referee's whistle to end the 1st half of play. Again, the same procedures above should be followed.

DEFINITIONS

Wet Bulb Globe Temperature: A measure of heat stress in direct sunlight which takes into account air temperature, humidity, wind speed, sun angle, and cloud cover (solar radiation). This

measurement differs from the Heat Index, which is an adjusted air temperature taking into account air temperature and humidity – i.e., what it “feels” like.

National Weather Service: An Agency of the United States government that is tasked with providing weather forecasts, warnings of hazardous weather, and other weather-related products to organizations and the public, for the purposes of protection, safety, and general information.

Excessive Heat Warning: An Excessive Heat Warning is a warning issued within 12 hours of the onset of extremely dangerous heat conditions when the maximum heat index is expected to be 105°F or higher for at least 2 days and the nighttime air temperature will not drop below 75° F. These criteria vary across North America.

Excessive Heat Watch: An Excessive Heat Watch is issued when conditions are favorable for an excessive heat event in the next 24-72 hours. A watch is used when the risk of a heat wave has increased; but its occurrence and timing are still uncertain.

Heat Advisory: A Heat Advisory is issued within 12 hours of the onset of extremely dangerous heat conditions. The advisory is issued when the maximum heat index temperature is expected to be 100°F or higher for at least 2 days and the nighttime air temperatures will not drop below 75° F (37.8° C). These criteria vary across North America.

NWSL PLAYOFFS:
Single-Elimination Format

WHO QUALIFIES:

At the conclusion of the Regular Season the top eight teams will qualify for the playoffs, with all playoff teams playing in the opening round. See below for full details on seeding and the playoff bracket:

In both the quarterfinal and semi-final rounds the higher seeded team will host, unless venue availability does not permit in which the lower seed may host. In the first round (quarterfinals), the Teams will compete as follows: 1 v 8 seed; 2 v 7 seed; 3 v 6 seed; and 4 v 5 seed. After the conclusion of the first round, the teams will compete in the second round (semifinals) as follows: the winner of the 1 v 8 seed game will play the winner of 4 v 5 seed game, and the winner of the 2 v 7 seed game will play the winner of the 3 v 6 seed match. The winners of each semi-final game will compete in a Championship game to decide the winner of the 2025 NWSL Championship.

If the score is tied after 90 minutes of play in any playoff game, two 15-minute extra time periods will be played in their entirety, followed by a penalty shoot-out, if necessary.

TEAM-STANDINGS TIE-BREAKING PROCEDURES:

The Team awarded the highest position in the standings will be the Team with the greatest number of points. In the event that two or more Teams finish the Regular Season with an equal number of points, the following system will be used to break the tie:

1. Goal differential
2. Most total wins
3. Most goals scored
4. Head-to-head results (total points accumulated)
5. Head-to-head most goals scored
6. Least Disciplinary Points Accumulated
 - a. Yellow card: 1 point
 - b. Indirect red card (as a result of two (2) yellow cards): 3 points
 - c. Direct red card: 4 points
 - d. Yellow card and direct red card: 5 points
 - i. Only one of the above point totals shall be applied to a Player in a single Game.
7. Coin Flip (2 teams)/Drawing of lots (3+ teams)

NOTE: Each step in the tiebreaker process will fully determine standings (assuming no ties). For example, if Teams A, B, C, and D tie on points, and Team A has a goal differential of +5, Team B is +3, Team C is +3 and Team D is +1, the standings will be 1st Team A and 4th Team D. With Teams B and C still tied, they would move to the next Tiebreaker (most wins), which would settle which of B and C is ranked 2nd and 3rd.